

# **The power of listening**

(28 June 2015 by Lisa Gellert)

Can listening make a difference?

I am here to tell you a story. When I asked Clay how I should give this talk he said: tell a story. They like stories. So here you go. I tell you a story. But to make it more interesting it is not just one, but actually I share different stories. And by the end, it is up to you to decide if and how listening makes a difference.

## **Setting the stage: 2014 in Germany**

I am back in Germany after an overseas term at the University of Washington in Seattle as part of my second Master program in Peace Studies and International Politics. It is in Seattle that a friend introduces me to the Compassionate Listening Project and I decide to write my dissertation about it. So this is how I started thinking about the impact of listening in a conflict setting, but also in general in your everyday life.

Once back in Germany I need to start writing the thesis. And I have a hard time. I should be used to it by now. After all, it is my second Master dissertation – I have already completed a one-year Master at King's College London in 2012.

In my thesis I focus on Compassionate Listening as a tool of reconciliation. Of the four communication skills (speaking, reading, writing and listening) adults actually spend most time, 42-60%, with listening in their everyday life and yet, listening is not valued. We have prizes and competitions for best speakers – but for listeners?

When thinking about listening in a conflict setting here is the problem: Listening itself does not aim at solving the conflict or providing a solution to the conflict parties. It does not facilitate any negotiations. Listening acknowledges.

So how can it actually make a difference? How can listening make a difference?

## **Story 1: Compassionate Listening delegations – Listening in a conflict setting, Israel/Palestine**

Since 1998, Compassionate Listening delegations from the U.S. have visited Israel/Palestine. Compassionate Listening is mainly about validating each person's account. It assumes that conflict arises when people are not heard and their grievances are not addressed. Everyone, every party to a conflict, holds a piece of the truth – like a puzzle. These delegations follow a pattern: first week workshop on Compassionate Listening and then meeting with different groups from all sides; from Israeli settlers to Hamas members. Mostly, the delegation meets with the groups alone. Sometimes they also come to invite groups to

meet; however, Compassionate Listening is foremost about listening – not initiating a dialogue.

In 2006 Frida Kerner Furman, a committed US-American Jew is part of a delegation. They meet with the Mayor of Beit Ummar, Farham al-Qaham, a member of Hamas.

First they listen to the common story of imprisonment, restriction of everyday activities and harassment. But then it shifts into a personal account of the latest arrest, and al-Qaham opens up about how Israeli soldiers arrived at his home at 2:00 a.m., refusing to let him change his clothes or say goodbye to his young sleeping children. When the children went to see him in prison, they were emotionally hurt. His 12-year-old son began crying that “bars are for criminals”, not for those pursuing good for people. He now fears that his sons will learn to hate. This meeting has a deep effect on Frida and the Mayor, she writes:” A couple of weeks after my return to the States, I receive a pithy e-mail from the mayor, written in broken English and sent to the whole Compassionate Listening delegation. He writes that his meeting with us was unique, the first of its kind. He says that he’s telling everyone he knows all about it.”

Rabbi David Zaslow is part of a delegation in 1998. He summarizes his experiences:

“Now I feel absolutely shattered. There is no answer that I have, but I have many answers. It’s like a puzzle. I came here clearly as a political interest, as a very, very strong Zionist recognizing the pain of the people, but not really recognizing the Palestinians as people. Really there is a Palestinian state, it is a de-facto state that is existing right now even though intellectually, in my own mindset, I wasn’t seeing the Palestinian state. It’s existing. It may have not come to treaty yet. Yeretz Israel is a very holy concept to me. It is the land that God promised to our people. I think what God forgot to tell us is that he also promised it to another people. And that the job of the children of Abraham is to both, to realize that this is the promised land for our people. And to be able to figure out how to do the contract negotiations so we can have two states on one land.”

## Story 2: Gene Knudsen Hoffman – Being listened to, 1969 United States

Gene is an US-American peace activist – amongst various other things. In her early sixties (around 1980s) her seven children have left home, she goes on a pilgrimage around the world to visit peace centers and peace activists. It is in London that she comes across a revolutionary idea – a worship for the tortured and the torturers. It is revolutionary to her as it puts the torturers on the same level as the tortured. A worship for both sides. A worship side by side. This is the starting point for Compassionate Listening.

However, I want to share a story of hers that takes place earlier – going back to the year 1969. Gene voluntarily checks into a psychiatric hospital after a mental

breakdown: work overload, her first husband had left her, two of her children had cut off their contact to her.

It is here that she discovers and experiences the power of being listened to first-hand.

„For the first time in my remembered life, I had been permitted to go through an intense emotional experience with someone else and wasn't stopped. Nobody said, "You frighten me." Nobody said, "You're a big girl - or a grown woman - you don't need to cry." I did need to cry - and I did. Nobody explained away my parents' behavior, telling me how much they have suffered. (I always knew how much they had suffered and had tried to balance my own pain against theirs.) Nobody said, "They've done so much for you - why aren't you grateful?" In that moment, I owned my own feelings! And felt the way I did. For the first time, I didn't have to worry about their sufferings - I was permitted to experience my own - without guilt. When Dr Forester said anything, he encouraged me to experience there, in his office, all the hate and rage I'd felt (but never dared admit even to myself) since I was very young. He didn't interpret; he didn't analyze; he was just there. And for the first time, when I was experiencing an emotional hurricane, I was fully conscious that I was not crazy, not evil, not destructive, not bad. Nobody wrote me off as irrational. And I wasn't. I was more completely sane and rational than I'd ever had a chance to be before in my whole life. I had been hurt, terribly hurt (as all of us are in this culture), and it was rational to be angry and full of grief."

### Story 3: Holding the space through listening, 2015 New Zealand

I am working with the Peace Foundation in Auckland. Part of my job is co-facilitating conflict resolution and mediation trainings in secondary schools around Auckland. I have been to a couple of trainings over the last months.

Now that my internship is nearly coming to an end I get the chance to accompany Carol, the Maori coordinator of the PF, to a training in the Maori unit of Henderson High School.

We go through the process of powhiri - we are called in, they perform a haka while we get into the school marae, we introduce ourselves in Maori, lay down a koha and hongiri.

The students are 16/17 years old and even the principal joined for a couple of hours during the day. We have the training in the marae, which immediately gives it a different atmosphere than the other trainings in classrooms. Many Maori terms are introduced - tika, pono, rangimarie. And we try to stick to the plan. There is a template of the mediation process and the aim of the program is to train them to become peer mediators. However, after having shared lunch we try to do the "typical" thing - breaking up into groups and role-modelling a mediation process. The scenarios are about spreading rumors, not doing part of assigned group work, cheating, bullying. It turns out - the kids say: no, we

wouldn't use this service. We wouldn't do it this way. So Carol tries to approach a potential conflict scenario in a different way. We all sit in a circle and one stick lying on the ground. Whoever has a problem can take the stick – no one else can talk – share the problem and we try to find a solution in the group.

A girl gets up, takes the stick and starts talking – and no one could have prepared us for what was coming next:

“It seems like all my life I have been surrounded by death. Last week I lost my cousin and I haven't spoken to anyone about it. Not even my boyfriend. I have lost my uncle a month before and then being back there for the funeral and this time seeing my cousin lying there in the coffin... It is just so hard. He committed suicide. I don't know why he did it. Just like my brother he also committed suicide. And now my baby brother is gone and my mother doesn't even look for him. And I am so scared that I will lose him as well.”

We all sit in a circle on the ground, in silence crying with her.

Another boy takes the stick:

“I have been involved ..you know..being on the street doing stuff. Getting angry, robbing shops. And I want to get away from it. My whole family is doing this. My cousin is supposed to be here at school today, but he isn't. He is probably out there doing something. And I don't want to do this anymore. I want to finish school and get a proper job.”

We all sit in a circle on the ground, in silence crying with him.

## The power of listening

After hearing these three different stories about listening – the Compassionate Listening delegations, Gene's personal journey and my experience I want to come back to the starting questions, can listening make a difference at all?

How can listening create change? It seems so passive.

Let's consider the case of Israel/Palestine. How can listening compassionately make a difference? Shouldn't they be having a dialogue or following a mediation process?

But here is another question that I came to ask myself: why should members of opposing conflict groups be willing to approach the other side? People who dehumanize the other side, who for generations associate violence, pain and hate with the other side – why should they want to sit down to have a dialogue, tell a story or follow a mediation? Why would they want to sit down with “the enemy” and risk being accused and blamed?

The Compassionate Listening workshops in Israel/Palestine often provide the space for Palestinians meeting with a Jew for the first time – or vice versa. Compassionate Listening as a practice is trust building and while doing so setting aside advocacy. It doesn't solve the conflict. But it does make a difference.

Thinking back to Gene's and my experience - how can listening be powerful?

Sometimes holding the space, allowing for emotions to be felt, acknowledging pain and confusion instead of giving advice is the best we can do. We are all about "fixing" things: fixing problems, fixing people, fixing ourselves. Because we care and want them or us to feel better.

And sometimes we feel powerless when confronted with devastating pictures on the news, sitting with someone who has lost a loved one, seeing a friend in pain.

But by trying to snap with the finger to make everything alright we overlook an important thing: pain as much as joy demands to be felt. By pushing someone "just to see the bright aspects of life" we - unconsciously - deny their emotions and thoughts when actually simply acknowledging the suffering would be a good starting point.

During my studies and especially writing my dissertation I was trying to understand and analyze how people come to reconcile, and yet I find myself in a personal reconciling process -with myself. I have already been fighting for years now - fighting against the injustice we see on TV each day, against expectations - either work-related (such as everything for the CV, constant evaluations) or in your private life (get started with working on "my husband-my children-my house" blueprint), and all of this led to fighting against myself and why I just wouldn't or didn't want to go down that road and why, for goodness sake, I just couldn't save the world?!

I might not be able to save the world, but I can listen. I listened to refugees from Sudan back home in Germany sharing their stories about crossing the Mediterranean Sea. I listened to refugees from Afghanistan during my time on the Peace Boat and afterwards they thanked us for listening and being interested in their story. And last Monday during that training I felt honored and humble that I was part of this group. That we could create this safe environment for these kids to open up. Sometimes there is not a lot we can do but to honestly listen. But then again, that actually is a lot already.